

# DESIGN AND SOCIAL UTOPIAS

## THE OPEN-ENDED DESIGN OF HETEROTOPIC MOVEMENTS

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This chapter is meant to share some of my reflections on how designers' skills can be applied to produce the conditions necessary for enabling the social, economic and environmental changes necessary for transitioning our societies towards more democratic and plural possibilities. It presents some initial thoughts on the relationship between the concept of utopia and the design process and the role that, so far, the concept of utopia has been playing in the design process. It also brings to the reader's attention the concept of heterotopia and points out its relevance for design practice to be able to contribute to more democratic futures. Finally, it introduces my initial ideas on the need to design for "heterotopic movements towards transition".

### DESIGNING SOCIAL UTOPIAS

A few years ago, at Design Thinkers, a design conference, when asked about the relationship between design and utopia, Paola Antonelli, renowned design curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, stated: "designers at all scales imagine a place that does not exist (yet), populated by beings, tools, interfaces and experiences that represent our contemporary goals and aspirations"

(TERSIGNI, 2016). With these words, Antonelli clearly remarked on one of the main inherent features of the design process: utopian thinking. Designers envision situations that transcend (and/or aim at transcending) the existing ones and pursue them through their work. This happens both when in the design process there are *ad hoc* activities aimed at envisioning alternative social scenarios, and when there are not. As a matter of fact, every design artifact is a representation of a specific understanding of reality that also gives shape to its features. Design is a world-making and sense-making activity that constantly declares its role in the achievement of imagined, alternative social scenarios through design projects.

The general understanding of the design community about the role and potential of envisioning alternative scenarios in the design process is exemplified by Christopher Turner, director of the London Design Biennale of 2016: design can point out a relevant debate and catalyze change “by suggesting inspiring or cautionary futures. Together these visions formed a laboratory of ambitious ideas that might contribute to making the world a better place” (LONDON DESIGN BIENNALE, 2016). Envisioning in design is designing social utopias that will contribute to overcome current issues and to improve daily reality. Therefore, utopia and utopian thinking have a crucial role and relevance within a design process and practice aimed at more democratic futures.

Utopia, from the Greek *οὐ* «not» e *τόπος* «place», was introduced by Thomas More in 1516. It means “no place” and refers to the projection of a “place that does not exist”. Among utopia main features are: being a nonexistent place, being described in detail and being located in a specific time and space (CLAEYS; SARGENT, 1999). The association to a specific location furthers the idea that it might exist and, along with the detailed description, makes it relatable to its audience (CLAEYS; SARGENT, 1999). This also means that even if, usually, it is understood as the projection of a positive nonexistent society, utopia is an imaginative projection of a society that is different from its author’s, but does not have either a positive or negative connotation in itself. As a matter of fact, according to *The Utopia Reader* (CLAEYS; SARGENT, 1999), there are two variations of utopia: eutopia (positive utopia), as a projection of a society that the contemporary audience understands as better than the society in which they live; dystopia (negative utopia) as the description of a society with highly negative political, social, technological features — the bad place.

Design has always been engaged with the process of transforming and of imagining transformation of the present with the aim of either achieving a specific outcome or developing possibilities to achieve them. This is a broad

statement that embraces the points of convergency of different understandings of design: for instance, design understood as a process of making things how they ought to be in order to achieve a desired outcome (SIMON, 1969) or as a way of acting that allows to imagine something that is not there and ways to achieve it through crucial sense, creativity and practical sense (MANZINI, 2015) or even when design is a mean to speculate how thing could be (DUNNE; RABY, 2013), among others.

Thus, utopias are both outcomes of the creative process of design and a catalyst of subsequent design processes. Specifically, utopias are the result and focus of meta-design activities, while the design of artifacts for the realization of such utopias is the focus and outcome of subsequent design processes. As a matter of fact, utopian visions are what designers look towards when engaged in the design of new artifacts. We can understand the latter as the shape that utopian visions acquire within the boundaries of current reality. Hence, design refers to the process of temporary materialization of future possibilities.

## WHY, THEN, SHOULD DESIGNERS RETHINK THE ROLE AND RELEVANCE OF UTOPIAN THINKING WHEN DESIGNING FOR FUTURE PLURAL AND DEMOCRATIC POSSIBILITIES?

Over the last decade we have witnessed a growing understanding among design scholars<sup>1</sup> about the need for the design discipline and its related practice to undergo fundamental changes in order to be able to contribute to more democratic social possibilities. This understanding has gained strength due to the increasing awareness about the crisis (as well as limitations and implications) of the model of scientific rationality that, till the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ruled in the production of knowledge in every branch of knowledge and, therefore, in people's mind and behaviors in all areas of human life and activities (MORIN; LE MOIGNE, 2000). This model was structured around the understanding that human beings should and could dominate and manipulate, in a foreseeable way, nature through scientific knowledge. According to this, reality, which is apparently complex, is characterized by order and made of separated elements that can be organized and reorganized through the laws of nature in line with human beings' interests. Functionalism and determinism are crucial principles of this

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance the special issue of the Strategic Design Journal on Design and Autonomia (BOTERO et al., 2017), and the call for contributions and proceedings from the Participatory Design Conference 2020 (DEL GAUDIO et al, 2020), among others.

scientific paradigm. The limits of this paradigm, which is in crisis but still alive, have emerged since the second half of the previous century (for more on this, see SANTOS, 1987). Its crisis was caused by scientific discoveries that have converged into the theories of complexity, as well as by the understanding of the socio-environmental issues caused by that way of thinking and acting. All of this has brought up the need to explore new ways of thinking and interacting with the world we live in, as well as new principles through which to rethink disciplinary knowledge.

According to Santos (1987), some of these crucial discoveries and related principles are: the understanding of the impossibility of separating subject and object, that is, the structural interference of them with one another; uncertainty and unpredictability, and the dialogical relationship between order and disorder as key principles of the reality in which we live in and of its possibilities to exist and evolve; the relevance of the interaction and relationships between the elements, in addition to the relevance given to the elements themselves; the limits of reason and, above all, the understanding that scientific knowledge is not the result of discovery but of an act of creation in which the subject and object are in continuity; among others. In the new scientific paradigm, which emerges from these understandings, but is still under construction, there are some concepts that are particularly relevant for the reflections presented in this chapter. First, there is the feminist standpoint theory and the related concept of situated knowledge (HARAWAY, 1988). Knowledge is socially situated and there are some perspectives that are better than others in each specific situation as a starting point for knowledge building. Furthermore, knowledge production happens within and is shaped by a local power force (HARDING, 2003). Second, we need to rethink the instrumental use that we make of our reality, whose harmful implications became undeniable with the current environmental crisis and the other main global issues we are currently facing. Lastly, at least for the purpose of this chapter, we have the understanding of reality as constituted by complex systems that form a whole that is in constant transformation due to emerging dynamic relationships. In other words, the world in which we live in is not characterized by the principles of stability and permanence, but rather by evolutionary processes and by situations of constant instability (PRIGOGINE apud VASCONCELLOS et al., 2015). According to the theory of dynamic systems, new unimagined and unforeseen possibilities and life arise in systems that are unstable, nonlinear and open (VASCONCELLOS et al., 2015).

When it is understood that a different rationality is necessary when thinking, understanding and acting in our everyday life, it becomes clear that advancements in knowledge in design and more traditional fields are not enough to contribute to the necessary changes. This is because design is a profession and discipline that has emerged and evolved within the paradigm that has contributed to current environmental, social and economic crises. The foundations of design practice — therefore its concepts, methods, techniques and tools — were generated by the key principles of the previous scientific paradigm and the economic-capitalist system: functionalism, rationalism and determinism, among others. The design discipline needs to move away from this and rethink its very nature, its main concepts, principles and features if it wants to contribute to addressing current global issues. As a matter of fact, these roots do not allow design to contribute because they lead to the same conditions that have caused current issues. It needs to rethink them in light of its contradictions and limits. Design needs to be able to relate differently to reality, to produce and contribute to the existence of different realities, and to act according to the principles of the new paradigm. Thus, design needs to redefine itself and its practice from different epistemological perspectives (ESCOBAR, 2016). Researchers in design need to enable design processes to embrace complexity and the discipline to overcome the understanding of itself as an instrument to operate nature's machine. In this way, design will be able to promote broader changes in societies, social learning processes and the transition towards more sustainable and plural ways of living.

Therefore, we are looking for a design practice that is plural, not functionalist and determinist. In the context of this chapter, this means that design should move far from being a practice that aims to create order according to one specific vision through the manipulation of existing resources. In critically reflecting on design approaches, tools, techniques and practices, design scholars should also rethink the function of utopia and its relevance within the design process.

As a matter of fact, utopian projections within a design process are often unique visions aligned to a specific discourse. The issue, here, lies in being single-minded and not plural, both when they are desired and when they are feared. Even though, in some cases, these visions might be the result of a collective process of envisioning, whose potential issue of indirectly forced consensus I discussed in some of my previous works (DEL GAUDIO et al., 2018), they catalyze a design trajectory in which a series of artifacts emerging from the same principles are designed. Even though these artifacts can have different configurations, they are the embodiment, replication and dissemination of the same

principles and dynamics of the same discourse. When they enter real life, they become the means for the constant representation of an idea and the possibilities that this idea entails. They become deterministic. Furthermore, even though the initial vision can change due to adaptation to each design process, this vision is always aligned to a specific existing discourse that is strengthened by each design activity. The initial vision perpetuates one idea of society and promotes the organization in a new configuration that will change current order into the one suggested by the discourse. Even if by envisioning utopias in the design process designers develop a new possibility (or, when more than one, new possibilities), the process of envisioning contributes neither to the never-ending creation of new ones, nor to a situated vision — which would require the discourse to be redefined constantly.

Furthermore, an interesting example of the limits of utopian thinking in design is the one pointed out by Andrews (2009) upon analyzing the discourse of early industrial design. At the time, designers believed that design could lead to a better future society based on economic and material well-being through constantly stimulating and increasing consumption. In other words, their “compelling vision of a utopian future” was achievable through designing and selling new products, the stimulation of people’s desire to own new and better products and the constant and indiscriminate use of natural resources (ANDREWS, 2009, p. 72). Designers such as Bel Geddes understood that the advancements made in the design of new products would allow for the establishment of a new order and would achieve a better future (ANDREWS, 2009). By acting at a micro level, designers would promote transformation at a macro level — in the social, economic and environmental systems. The dominating values of that period embodied in utopian design projections and artifacts contributed to the unsustainable society in which we live. However, designers were only trying to contribute with their visions and artifacts to a widespread utopia presented and embodied in the modern discourse.

## HOW CAN DESIGN THEN PROMOTE PLURIVERSAL AND NOT UNIVERSAL FUTURES?

The relevance of rethinking the current role of utopia within design emerges stronger upon engaging with the political theory of agonism, which also enables the identification of a new path for the discussed relationship. According to this theory, a democratic society is characterized by a process of constant and nev-

er-ending confrontation between actors with different and contrasting positions, as well as by a subsequent process of tolerant and constructive organization of these different perspectives. This is why, in a pluralistic society, consensus is not to be expected due to the variety of opinions, perspectives and possibilities. At the same time, consensus and rational deliberation can be means used by hegemonic voices to support or implement hegemonic power structures. Consensus around a shared idea can be a strategy implemented to deprive social actors of their possibilities of expression, and so of different ideas to be heard and considered. The possibility for the expression of differences and productive conflict is what allows a society to be democratic and pluralistic (MOUFFE, 2000). According to Mouffe (2000), spaces of confrontation should be created where the different actors may discuss different points of view. The constant discussion happening in these spaces will challenge current order and hegemonic power configurations, open the space up for new possibilities of being, as well as push the current situation to evolve. These spaces foster the resilient dimension of society by challenging and changing the present system. Based on the theory of agonistic democracy, conflict and confrontation are crucial conditions for democracy: they are catalysts of more democratic scenarios.

When reflecting on the promotion of new more democratic scenarios through design, that is, on the process of transforming the present reality into different and multiple realities through processes in line with the theory of agonism, the design process should involve a process of destruction of the same reality. To build new, more democratic social settings, the current, undemocratic ones need to be undone. To do this, according to how new possibilities are generated (VASCONCELLOS et al., 2015), the designer must, first, act so that the current systems move away from their current state of equilibrium until reaching the state of new possibilities. Conflict and confrontation are crucial catalysts of this process.

Thus, the relevance lies less in design visions or outcomes and more on what can, during a design process, challenge current discourse and visions, move the current situation away from a state of equilibrium and shift it towards a new position constantly. As designers, we should give less relevance to utopias (and utopian thinking) in design and direct our focus towards heterotopias and towards the interplay that can happen with them in a design process.

## WHAT IS A HETEROTOPIA?

*There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places — places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society — which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (FOUCAULT, 1984, p. 3–4).*

According to Foucault (1984), heterotopias are utopias that exist: they are real and can be identified in current space and time. Among their features, two of them are particularly relevant for our discussion: being a counter space and their opening-closing mechanism.

With regards to being counter spaces, while utopias are no-places and often understood as ideal places to be achieved, heterotopias are different since they concomitantly exist and at the same time they do not fit within the present situation — due to embodying alternative possibilities of being. They can be understood as “other spaces”, since they are totally different from the context in which they are localized and that they counterpose. They can be understood as the expression of different voices that are different from mainstream ones. They are multiple and they bring and support a plurality of possibilities without being or striving for being hegemonic, since they do not represent a specific vision but counterpose specific contextual situations at the local level — their variety and number being potentially infinite. Heterotopias have the function of either exposing real life or compensating for it:

*Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory (perhaps that is the role that was played by those famous brothels of which we are now deprived). Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation. (FOUCAULT, 1984, p. 8).*

Furthermore, Foucault (1984) explains that heterotopic space has the capacity to allow a mixed experience where the audience is neither in one place nor in another, but rather experiencing both places at the same time within the same space. Due to their subversive nature, tension forces are generated by and around heterotopias. These forces can be intensified when someone gets in contact with



them and experiences them, since they expose reality and allow discrepancies to emerge. The latter is a situation that has the potential to unfold into conflict and even change. Due to being opposing, multiple and plural, heterotopias sustain and have the potential to sustain a particular agonistic battle, one that can articulate plural and democratic expressions. Furthermore, since they exist within the limits of real situations, they adapt to them and to their constant changes, thereby avoiding being prescriptive. There is no rejection of other possibilities, but rather coexistence of different ones.

Regarding their opening-closing mechanism, they are islands ruled by different dynamics and they are opened and closed at the same time. Even though they can be found within reality, due to their opening and closing mechanisms, accessing them is not easy (FOUCAULT, 1984). A certain permission or certain qualities are necessary (i.e., shared gestures, features, values, etc.). The possibility of accessing them is not based on someone's choice. Heterotopias do not ask you to enter them, to access them or to get in contact with them. In order to enter them, you need to share something with them, or your access should be facilitated.

While the first quality is relevant to explain why heterotopia has a greater potential than utopia for more democratic and plural future possibilities, the second one is relevant for understanding the idea of heterotopic movements.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SUCH SPACES MEET REALITY?

It is from the concept of heterotopia that I derive the concept of “heterotopic movements towards transition” as the way to rethink design practice. This expression comes from understanding the points of concurrency between the new understanding of reality and its evolution, and the concepts of heterotopia and utopia. “Heterotopic movements towards transition” happen when heterotopias meet present situations.

When heterotopias meet reality, that is, when someone meets and experiences them, a conflict is generated. Whoever meets a heterotopia lives the mixed experience of being in two different worlds at the same time and experiences the discrepancies between them. The misfit between the two situations, governed by different rules and values, provokes a critical reflection on what has been experienced so far, on what could have been or on what could lead to — heterotopia can be both existing utopias and dystopias — and this generates a situation of conflict. This comprehension is not new. The very feature of a heterotopia im-

plicates such conflictual disposition. What I suggest here is that this conflictual atmosphere is something that designers should recognize as being what their practice should focus on and as the key for future plural and democratic possibilities instead of utopian projection.

As a matter of fact, when this conflict happens, some turbulence and instability are created in the existing system, which allow it to gradually move from its current state to a new one. Therefore, when someone comes across a heterotopia, a conflict emerges that can lead to a new idea and desire, thereby shifting the present situation towards (and into) a new one. This encounter and conflict are productive since they reveal and create other possibilities.

The internal conflict for whoever encounters a heterotopia causes and is followed by a reaction. All this can be understood as a movement since the reaction shifts the current situation into a new one, a new place. Furthermore, this movement happens in the space and time span between the encounter-conflict and the implementation of a new action. In this space-time, a reaction is organized and informed by certain values in which whoever is involved believes and wants to pursue. The latter can belong to a utopian projection. However, what is relevant here is the emergence of these values and ability of putting them into action during the movement phase — when the reaction is organized. These values and desires are adapted accordingly to the encounter, the situation and the people involved and potentially evolving with them. Utopias exist, but only in the background: they are lived, experienced and discussed at every encounter. In this overall situation, heterotopias exist in two different moments and locations: in the encounter and in the movement — that is, in the coming together of these principles and qualities. The qualities of the desired situation exist more in the movement than in the reaction, in which they are distorted due to the need to be adapted to reality. In the movement, they are in their purest form.

I defined this movement as a heterotopic movement because it is totally different from the context in which it happens. It counterposes the situation that originated it and, at the same time, it moves forward to another situation by embodying its desired principles. This movement can be understood not only as a space in itself too, but as a counter-space in which new possibilities are generated. Furthermore, this space can be the design process, in which the encounter and consequent movement can take place.

## WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER WHEN FOCUSING ON HETEROTOPIC MOVEMENTS TOWARDS TRANSITION?

A design process that aims to deal with current social, economic and environmental challenges and to promote more sustainable contexts does not have to act in the perspective of future utopias, but rather look at the present situated heterotopias-dystopias and heterotopias-utopias and use them to foster a shift from the current situation to a new one.

Designers should provoke the encounter with heterotopias-dystopias and heterotopias-utopias, as well as feed the ability to recognize differences, choose and react. Following this, designers should be able to support the organization of a reaction. Lastly, designers have to support new reactions subsequent to the implementation of the previous cycle of reaction, contributing to a never-ending process.

Design becomes relevant for the potentiality of designing encounters (heterotopia-reality) that can create a perturbation, thereby generating a transition movement that shifts the current situation towards a different one.

Designers' focus should not be on a specific design process and/or on its result but rather on designing for these encounters and the subsequent movement. Design process becomes an on-going and never-ending process that aims to provoke movements that can foster changes in the present situation, not according to a specific vision, but by supporting autonomy for change according to specific local visions and situations. This will also contribute to avoiding hegemonic situations: the trajectory is always redesigned based on previous and simultaneous movements. This can support the constitution of a society with plural ways of dealing with current issues and possibilities of being.

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